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Abstract

Much recent scholarship in the social sciences has recognised the importance of grasping the significance of non-human forces in both social and natural life. Still, we remain faced with the task of reconceptualising some of our more classically humanist problems in other than human terms. This paper undertakes to refigure one such problem, an issue that in moral and political discourse in particular has presented itself as a pressing, and sometimes intractable, problem; namely, **what does it mean to be indifferent? The** idea of political indifference, for example, evokes an attitude of neutrality or apathy deemed inappropriate to the sphere of political action. The assumption here is that **indifference is a subjective quality, a characteristic inhering in those individuals or groups who are insufficiently motivated to exercise their capacity for free and deliberative action.** This paper re-examines the common sense understanding of indifference, which, I argue, is bound to a moral purview and rests on an essentially confused view of human freedom. I suggest that rethinking the problem of indifference requires an ‘ontological renaturalisation’, in order to better understand the forces that condition human action. In pursuing this argument, I contribute to a growing body of scholarship that recognises the role of the aesthetic in opening our frameworks of thinking beyond their more humanist limitations. I argue that **an aesthetic, as opposed to moral, framework, can re-conceptualise indifference as an ambiguous and potentially productive process, rather than a deficient state or subjective failing.**

Keywords

Indifference, post-human, aesthetics, Nietzsche, Spinoza

Introduction

If the ideas of the ‘non-human’ and the ‘post-human’ are to avoid becoming mere clichés of contemporary social scientific discourse, the task remains to persist in refiguring our most classically humanist problems in other than human terms. This necessarily includes a critical rethinking of our most cherished assumptions about ourselves as beings, our own qualities

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and capacities, as well as our relationship to the world that we inhabit. If what is at issue is the very foundation of the way that we understand the relationship between the human and the non-human world, the legacy of our humanist understandings of freedom, rooted as they are in an understanding of free action as the realisation of sovereign will, continues to present problems requiring creative rearticulation. One problem that goes to the heart of our moral and political appraisals of contemporary reality with respect to the status of the human is the problem of indifference. Given the sense of crisis that pervades academic and popular discourse alike, the question of what it means to be responsible for ourselves and our world has taken on particular force. And in the face of this perceived heightening of our responsibility for political, ecological and cultural systems, the spectre of indifference confronts us as an abhorrent failure to meet the demands of the day.

Diagnoses of our contemporary culture of indifference in academic and popular discourse alike abound: the citizenry of Western nations is said to be increasingly apathetic about participation in civic life, governments are accused of indifference to the plight of the suffering amongst its populace and modern culture more broadly said to be infected with a generalised malaise in the face of the imperatives of work and the charms of consumer capitalism (cf. Jameson, 1991; Manne and Corlette, 2004; Sennett, 2005; Simmel, 2002). The moral dignity and imperative character of such discourses rest on an image of a world wrought with troubles, against which sits the figure of the egoistic individual or, worse, the apathetic culture, indifferent to the moral and political challenges of the day. Moral discourses on indifference thus have as their horizon the spectre of moral complacency, a threat that is considered to be uniquely associated with 'our' era, with its evisceration of moral frameworks, the evils of value relativism and the temptations of egocentrism in the face of rising individualism (see, for example, Auron, 2000; Baum, 1996; Habermas, 2003). For critical thought oriented to a moral framework, then, the pressing task is to make explicit the mechanisms and effects of indifference, so as to counter this generalised impoverishment of awareness, conscience and resolve to act.

This paper re-examines the notion of indifference and questions the usefulness of the moral-political discourse with which it is habitually bound. In doing so, it contributes to debates in the humanities and social sciences on the limits of Kantian inspired moral philosophy to address contemporary socio-political problems in a world in which the sovereignty of human will has been placed into question. Non-representational theories have been especially attentive to the origin of seemingly subjective attitudes or emotions in affective forces that exceed the human beings that they traverse (Dewsbury 2009, 2012; McCormack, 2007; Sharpe, 2013; Thrift, 2007; Thrift & Dewsbury, 2000). To the extent that 'a Kantian, epistemic structuring of the world by the human subject' has been privileged within moral philosophical reasoning, post-Kantian theorists have sought to open up a world beyond the universe of human sense-making and judgment (Dixon et al., 2012: 252).

In seeking to open a space beyond the moral purview, there is an emergent recognition of the importance of the aesthetic. Understood as the realm of sensate experience, including, but also going above and beyond, the form that it takes in art, aesthetic experience has a potential to keep open problems and questions that, from the point of view of a moral purview, are always already closed. Recent turns to the aesthetic in the social sciences, then, have sought to articulate ways of encountering the world and its problems beyond the habits of more humanist and moral frames (Dixon et al., 2012; Hynes, 2013; Kingsbury, 2010; Lapworth, 2013; Sharpe, 2013). In seeking to reframe the problem of indifference in other than humanist terms, it is to this emergent body of literature that this paper contributes.

To anticipate my argument, I will suggest that the diagnosis of indifference as a problem of insufficient interest or an impoverishment of responsibility rests on a defective view of

human freedom, which reduces social and political thought ‘to denunciation or approbation instead of understanding and action’ (Sharp, 2011: 23). Social thought in recent decades has undoubtedly become more concerned with ontological enquiries into the nature of freedom and will, against the backdrop of what some have called the ‘ontological turn’ in social theory (Escobar, 2007). Yet, the dominant tradition of social and political thought remains more concerned with questions of justice and legitimation than with the more ‘ontological accounts of what kinds of beings we are’ (Sharp, 2011: 10). Rethinking the problem of indifference, I argue, requires just such an ontological enquiry into the kinds of beings we, as humans, are. To the extent that the analysis of the problem of indifference remains mired in a fallacious sense of human freedom, it will do little more than celebrate those acts of will that are deemed productive of moral action or bemoan their absence in individual and social life. Through seeking to better grasp the relationship between human will and action and the forces that condition it, the paper advances a less negative understanding of indifference. Far from a negative state of inaction, indifference can be seen as a process of affective differentiation, a fluxion of complex affective registers within which subtle, yet not insignificant, degrees of freedom are exercised.

In pursuing this argument, the paper takes the following trajectory. Firstly, I suggest that the treatment of indifference as a negative subjective attitude or human failing rests on a particularly humanist conceit; namely, the exceptionalist view that human freedom involves a capacity to transcend the forces that govern nature as such. This falsely modest presumption makes a number of ontological assumptions about our relationship to the world, which post-humanist and non-representational strands of social theory have rightly questioned in recent decades. Secondly, I trace the outlines of a different ontology, which emphasises the productive embeddedness of humans in the forces and relations that course through the realm of ‘nature’ as a whole. Clearly, this is not a new claim in the social sciences (see, for example, Whatmore, 2002; Whatmore and Hinchliffe, 2010). Yet, the implications of this embeddedness for the way that we approach contemporary problems that are habitually framed in humanist terms are yet to be explored. I argue that the specific problem of indifference can be productively re-inflected by drawing on two philosophical sources; namely, Nietzsche’s reflections on the indifferent character of nature, particularly in *Beyond Good and Evil*, and Spinoza’s project of ‘renaturalisation’ (Sharp, 2011). There are some important distinctions between the versions of naturalism that I am drawing from Spinoza and Nietzsche, though both share the idea that in nature itself there is neither good nor evil (Ansell Pearson, 2014). Both challenge the illusions of transcendence that support a moral universe in favour of immanence on both ontological and ethical registers, while Nietzsche explicitly raises the question of what it would mean to affirm the indifference of the forces of nature. In challenging the moral perspective on indifference, I, thirdly, indicate why an aesthetic perspective is better equipped to analyse what at first glance appear to be failures of resolve or atrophies of freedom. By drawing attention to our sensate relationship to the world – the point at which our valuations of the world are still active – an aesthetic perspective opens up more productive ways of evaluating the forces that we encounter in events.

In order to give some flesh to my argument, I briefly explore a problem that has thus far been considered in familiarly humanist terms; namely the issue of bystander action, which is often pointed to as a classic example of how the failure of human will to motivate action is symptomatic as well as productive of a culture of indifference. Taking an instance of bystander action in the context of everyday racism, I seek to move beyond the merely negative sense of indifference as an individual pathology or more generalised societal malaise. In doing so, I stress the multivalence of our passionate encounters. I suggest that

there are forms of action that do not presume to pull us out and above the forces that constitute us but recognise our immanence to them. In this way, I refigure indifference less as a deficient state or subjective failing, than as an affective process through which force is differentiated and actualised. The phenomenon of indifference, I suggest, involves being, quite literally, *in-difference*, in the midst of forces that constitute us as subjects at any given moment. I conclude that when we acknowledge the non-human forces in that which we habitually take to be our own doing, we are in a better position to think through the ethics and the politics of the complex events that constitute us.

Beyond exceptionalism

The common sense understanding of indifference as a deficient state operates against the backdrop of a presumed freedom, the kind of freedom that Kantian philosophy has perhaps most famously sought to determine as truly human (Kant, 1996). This problematic of our freedom and its exercise presumes a particular ontological relationship between human and non-human nature, a relationship that is preoccupying an ever widening range of scholars keen to challenge the dogmas of moral philosophy and elaborate a more ontologically derived ethics (Chakrabarty, 2009; Gibson, 2011; Grosz, 2011). If the empirical situations that motivate these scholarly preoccupations are far from favourable (climate change is an obvious example here), we can at least be grateful for the challenge they pose to our most cherished, yet demonstrably inadequate, ways of understanding our place in the world.

It is not simply the non-productivism of guilt and self-flagellation that I object to in this moral/political discourse, though these are certainly significant disablers of political and ethical action (Hynes and Sharpe 2009; Sharpe et al., 2005). As Spinoza famously insisted, a moral framework offers an inadequate understanding of our 'cause' and, as such, is precisely what keeps us from our power of action. Bemoaning one's own or others' indifference to the issues of the day, then, is not only potentially unproductive but also ontologically confused. The common sense denunciation of indifference, resting as it does on a moral image of human freedom, presumes that the human is somehow able to rise above the laws of cause and effect that determine the rest of nature. This 'compatibilist' position simultaneously holds a view of the natural world as determined by the laws of cause and effect, on the one hand, and the idea of humans as moral agents capable of responsibility and free will, on the other (Sharp, 2011).

In the attempt to unpack the presumptions of this compatibilist position, Spinoza, and particularly Deleuze's (1988) reading of his work, have been especially important. As Sharp puts it, Spinoza's project of 'renaturalisation' represents an insistence that 'no volitional power, divine or human, can operate independent of the natural order of cause and effect' (2011: 2). I would stress that such reference to the natural order of cause and effect does not imply a mechanistic or law governed nature but is intended as a description of bodies and minds in their own relations, their relations to other bodies and minds 'and the rules according to which all these relations compound with and decompose one another' (Deleuze, 1988: 19).

The attempt to reconceptualise the relationship of humans to non-human nature has motivated various strands of post-human and new materialist thought in recent decades, including Bennett's (2010) vital materialism and Connolly's (2002) immanent naturalism, to cite just two examples. In spite of such ontological experiments, it is still the case that Spinoza's philosophy makes a claim that is an anathema to the dominant tradition of thought; namely, that 'the external world is not the stage upon which self-consciousness manifests its freedom' (Sharp, 2011: 3), an observation that seems crucial to addressing the

ontological confusions at the heart of the moral perspective on indifference. Spinoza makes clear that the image of freedom as a decision of the mind betrays an inadequate knowledge of our cause (Spinoza, 2002). Yet, he need not be seen as abandoning the idea of human freedom altogether. Indeed, the point of his renaturalisation is to show that 'as long as our understanding of humanity is opposed to nature, we are in opposition to ourselves and the conditions of our freedom' (Sharp, 2011: 15). In contrast, 'an alternative conception of human freedom' will reconnect us with 'ambient powers, human and nonhuman' (Sharp, 2011: 15). It is a kind of false modesty that underpins the treatment of indifference as a failing of human subjects, since the accusation of deficient will rests upon our elevation of ourselves above natural forces. The question, then, is how we might reconceptualise the issue of indifference and, subsequently, some of the empirical problems to which it is attached, having recognised our positioning of ourselves at the pinnacle of the natural world as a fallacious conceit.

In seeking to contribute to those modes of thinking that open up to new ontological accounts of the kinds of beings we are, I would stress the need to go beyond the confines of the social constructivist paradigm that has dominated the social sciences in recent decades (Coole and Frost, 2010; Grosz, 2011). No doubt, social constructivism has been associated with the very important attempt to denaturalise the taken-for-granted and to reveal the normative impulses lurking in appeals to nature.¹ If, however, we are to rethink the ontology that underpins the image of the failed and indifferent subject we will need to question the constructivist faith in human agency as the source of things. We will need to refigure human agency as conditioned by forces that are always more than social, with the idea of understanding our place in the world otherwise. As Grosz (2011: 2) suggests:

If the human is simply one of the many trajectories that life on earth has elaborated, then many of the most cherished beliefs about how humans will and should behave in light of the manifest and lived differences that divide the human will be thrown open to new lines of development, new kinds of practice, and new modes of thought.

With respect to human life, a project of renaturalisation does not reinstate an opposition between the human and all that is non-human but involves a reconnection with the non-human powers within and without us, which myth and morality would have us transcend. Renaturalisation thus offers a way of being part of nature differently. As Keith Ansell-Pearson (2014) notes, Spinoza's thought fuses a philosophy of naturalism with a philosophy of life. Beyond the moral purview and its attendant view of human exceptionalism, Spinoza offers a way of being that reconnects us to the irreducible powers of nature and thus paves the way for an empirical education in the art of life (Ansell-Pearson, 2014).

I have been challenging the view that a capacity for moral sensibility and autonomy pulls the human outside and above natural laws and forces. In the following section, I would like to suggest that there is a much more affective basis to our relationship to, and attempts to differentiate ourselves from, the natural world of which we are a part. The question guiding the next part of the paper, then, is the following: if human exceptionalism rests on the idea that we can transcend the natural laws of cause and effect, how might we find, in a more honest appraisal of our place in the world, possibilities for a genuinely responsive relationship to the mutability of things? In asking this question, I show my sympathy for the kind of differential ontology that has become familiar to the social sciences in the work of Deleuze and which certainly underpins his deployment of both Spinoza and Nietzsche. My claim here is that an ontology that is sensitive to the complexities of the problem of indifference will not flatten out differences within a homogenising determination of the natural. Indeed, 'nature' is nothing

but differentiating force. What would it mean, then, for the human to live ‘in accordance’ with nature? Must distinguishing ourselves as ‘human’ necessarily involve a negation of the forces that constitute us? Or, to put the question in Nietzschean (2003) terms, what would a more affirmative ‘difference creating gesture’ look like?

Affirmation and the difference creating gesture

As the moral/political discourse of indifference would have it, good and evil exist as though in the nature of things. They are qualities of the world that need to be recognised for what they are and it is in our nature as human beings to be able to distinguish the one from the other. As Chomsky puts it, our existing systems of morality and justice ‘embody a kind of groping towards the truly human, valuable concepts of justice and decency and love and kindness and sympathy’ which themselves ‘are real’ (Foucault and Chomsky, 1971). But what of the idea that ‘nature’ is characterised by a profligate indifference? In taking seriously this question, there is much to be said for Nietzsche’s acceptance of the radical and extravagant indifference of nature as the condition for human existence. That is to say, indifference is not a subjective attitude that negligent subjects passively adopt. Human subjects are, rather, constituted by the radically indifferent forces that course through the world as such and by distinct manners of living in the face of this reality.

In this respect, the enduring preoccupation of *Beyond Good and Evil* – namely, ‘the relation between nature and human life’ (Lampert, 2001: 35) – indicates a tension of sorts between Nietzsche’s philosophy of nature and philosophy of life, which we do not find in the same degree in Spinoza. There is something more violent in Nietzsche’s grasp of nature. His version of naturalism holds that what is fundamental to human and all other life is not self-preservation, even if this can be observed, but the will to power: ‘rather than preserve or husband itself, “something living wants above all to discharge its strength”, to let it out. . . to express it or expand it’ (Lampert 2001: 43). Compared with the somewhat more conservative tendency to persist emphasised in Spinoza’s understanding of life as conatus, Nietzsche’s naturalism does not so much present the human with a solution to the problem of the illusions of moral transcendence but constitutes the human as the problem of how to live in a world where profligate indifference rules. Here again, however, I do not read Nietzsche as trying to reinstate a division between the human and ‘nature’, understood as everything that is not human. Rather, Nietzsche’s naturalist refusal of a ready-made moral/metaphysical order is a way of posing human life as a productive problem and power. A life that affirms nature, for Nietzsche, is one that does not seek to constitute the world in its own image but actively grapples with the problem of how one might affirm its power.

It is in Nietzsche’s reflections on the failings of the philosophical doctrine of Stoicism that the human relationship to an indifferent nature is best dramatised. In a characteristically polemical passage of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche rails against the Stoic ethical precept that one should, in order to achieve happiness, live in accordance with nature. Not wanting to react merely passively to external events, the Stoic makes a principle out of living and acting in virtuous accord with the universal reason of nature. The will is the organ of Stoic idealism, since it is through the wilful regulation of the passions that one exercises the virtues of self-restraint that maintain a harmony between man and the reason of nature. Not surprisingly, Nietzsche expresses the strongest distaste for the Stoic image of nature as reasoned, insisting instead on an image of a radically indifferent nature. Nietzsche (2003: 16) writes:

You desire to LIVE “according to Nature”? Oh, you noble Stoics, what fraud of words! Imagine to yourselves a being like Nature, boundlessly extravagant, boundlessly indifferent, without

purpose or consideration, without pity or justice, at once fruitful and barren and uncertain: imagine to yourselves INDIFFERENCE as a power—how COULD you live in accordance with such indifference?

The preposterousness of such an undertaking, Nietzsche insists, is threefold. In the first place, the Stoic glorification of the virtues of maintaining a will that is in accord with nature denies man's very embeddedness in nature: as Nietzsche (2003: 16) asks exasperatedly, 'is not the Stoic a PART of Nature?' Second, the Stoic choice to live in accord with reasonable nature elevates to an ideal an attitude that, for Nietzsche, is simply incompatible with the life of human beings. Insisting that nature, for its part, is indifferent, both in itself and to us, Nietzsche simultaneously rejects the image of the human that the Stoic idealises. 'To live', Nietzsche (2003: 16) asks, 'is not that just endeavouring to be otherwise than this Nature? Is not living valuing, preferring, being unjust, being limited, endeavouring to be different?' Third, Nietzsche suspects in the Stoic doctrine an attempt to impose upon external nature the same tyranny that the Stoic imposes upon his own nature. Nietzsche (2003: 16) writes:

In your pride you wish to dictate your morals and ideals to Nature, to Nature herself, and to incorporate them therein; you insist that it shall be Nature "according to the Stoa," and would like everything to be made after your own image, as a vast, eternal glorification and generalism of Stoicism!

We can spy in those contemporary discourses that berate the indifference of moral and political subjects much the same disavowed vanity. In the attempt to impose upon the world an order of values that only the sufficiently willing subject will obey, the human naturalises an image of itself as free with respect to the nature of things. Ideals of the moral life are thus founded on a denial of the radical indifference of nature, which is, in fact, its power. Wilkerson (undated) expresses well what is at stake here in Nietzsche's positing of an indifferent nature:

Within nature, one might say, energy disperses and accumulates in various force-points: nature's power to create these force-points is radically indifferent, and this indifference towards what has been created also characterizes its power.

Nietzsche takes on the role of his 'new psychologist' when he diagnoses in the human species a need to differentiate itself in the face of this world, which, for its part, is 'nothing besides' a 'monster of energy, without beginning, without end... eternally changing and eternally flooding back' (Nietzsche, 1967: 549–550). Human life is inseparable from valuing and preferring but nature itself is amoral: 'it is indifferent to mercy, justice and every other moral idea humanity creates to give value to life' (Spinks, 2003: 43). It is we who project our moral ideals and concepts onto the world, only to then naturalise a valued world as the real world. Yet, as Nietzsche insists (and here we can see evidence of the kind of renaturalisation that I have already discussed in relation to Spinoza) we are itself merely a part of the whole. With characteristic verve, Nietzsche (1968: 65) writes:

One *is* in the whole, there exists nothing which could judge, measure, compare, condemn our being, for that would be to judge, measure, compare, condemn the whole... *But nothing exists apart from the whole!*

I have suggested that the basis of human exceptionalism is the idea that we can somehow transcend the laws that apply to the rest of nature. Nietzsche advances our understanding of our habits of evaluating human life, by diagnosing our need (through science, morality,

culture and politics) to express our valuations and preferences and, in so doing, to differentiate ourselves from nature's indifference, from this profligate power that exceeds and constitutes us.

One implication is that good and evil, just and unjust lose their status as determinations of the world, which are merely awaiting our responsible apprehension and action. Nietzsche is scathing of those who treat good and evil as inherited values, thereby refusing the task of creating values. The question arises, then, of what it would mean to live in such a way as to affirm, rather than negate, the indifference of nature. This is a matter of exploring how 'the difference-creating gesture' that is 'the human being's essential work' might become a more affirmative 'living, valuing, wanting to be different, willing power' (Wilkerson undated, unpaginated).

Morality, I have suggested, cannot be the foundation of such an affirmation. Our moral values, as Nietzsche forcefully insists, 'answer to nothing in the world itself, but reflect instead only our "human, all too human" psychology', which itself is 'shot through with moral prejudices' (Havas, 1988: 119). In the following section, I will examine why an aesthetic, as opposed to a moral, purview might lend itself to more adequate understanding of the forces that produce us. Irreducible to the phenomenological relation of a human to its world, aesthetic experience can open a space beyond the prejudices of human psychology and the moral purview. It may thus point the way toward a more active evaluation of the forces encountered in events. In doing so, it might enable us to see that indifference is not so much a failing to be overcome as a potentially productive problem.

The sense of the event

I have been suggesting that we might understand indifference as something other than a problem of failed responsibility, which is to say that it is always more than a failure to answer to the demands of a pre-established order of good and evil. Rather, we would do well to recognise the indifference of nature and its unruliness with respect to the false clarity of the moral order of good and evil. If, as Nietzsche insists, life is essentially amoral, a moral justification of existence will have little meaning for us (see Came, 2009).² Insofar as morality always assumes a degree of transcendentalism, a claim to remove itself from the nature of things, it offers little to an understanding of how we are conditioned by forces that are themselves indifferent to us. We will thus need to shift the criteria upon which we rest our valuations and preferences beyond a moral basis if we are to renaturalise human life, reinserting it into the world of force in which it has its origin. We will need to find a basis for our evaluations that is less moral and more genealogical, which is to say, more able to enquire into the arrangements of forces that condition values.

It is a function of our existence as sensing, valuing beings that we seek to differentiate ourselves from nature's indifference (we do value, we do prefer). Yet, rather than criticising things in the name of existing values, the challenge is to more productively approach the problem of the creation of values. It is aesthetic experience that can enable just this, since it provides an encounter with the forces in which values have their origin. The modernist articulation of aesthetics as an autonomous sphere dedicated to the study of the beautiful has raised real concerns about the aestheticisation of politics (see Benjamin, 1968).³ Moreover, as Dixon et al. (2012: 1) note, scholars pursuing post-humanist concerns have often treated the aesthetic with suspicion, viewing it as a 'humanist remain'. However, a broader, and indeed more original, sense of the aesthetic offers more fruitful possibilities, connoting as it does a sensate relationship to 'corporeal, material reality', which is irreducible to human perception (Buck-Morss, 1992: 6).

While we are familiar with a moral interpretation of everyday events, it is the aesthetic encounter that opens the way toward a more active evaluation of the arrangements of force (active or reactive?) that values presuppose. When we evaluate life from an aesthetic perspective, we do so from a thoroughly immanent relation to its pullulations and mutations. Nietzsche emphasises that an aesthetic relation to the world involves, if not purpose, at least a kind of interest, insofar as it is that sensate embeddedness that makes us vested, that makes us value and prefer (Nietzsche, 1996). The sensate relationship with the materiality of the world that is aesthetic experience is, as Scott Sharpe (2013) points out, anything but anaestheticising.⁵ Aesthetic experience is, rather, characterised by a hyperacute sensitivity to the pricklings of the world, to the minute vibrations of matter as they pass into sensation. What aesthetic experience encounters is force in its raw state, at the point at which our evaluations remain open – not undeterminable but at least not yet determined. It is this sense of the aesthetic as an encounter with vital force before the phenomenology of human perception, most extensively articulated in the work of Deleuze (2005), which offers to open up the problem of indifference to new lines of thought.

At the level of sensation, then, the *sense* of the event remains open to a different mode of evaluation, one that might be more responsive to the matter of the world than the transcendent values of moralism (Hynes, 2013). In order to give some flesh to this claim and its significance for a reinterpretation of the problem of indifference, I would like to briefly examine an event that might at first glance look like a mere subjective failing, which is to say, like the kind of failure of care and will that the common sense perspective would identify as indifference. Consider the example of the following event:

A woman is preparing to get off a bus. Through the jostle of bodies, the efforts of her feet to move toward the steps that will lead her onto the street, the jarring motions and sounds of the vehicle and the mutterings of voices, one sound pricks her attention: a young man imitating the accent of a Chinese woman in front of him. The succeeding seconds slow and stretch. The woman becomes aware that her heart is beating. The door is opening... her body is carrying itself off the bus. She stands on the pavement and sees that the Chinese family looks lost and she asks if they would like help with directions. It is only afterwards that it registers in consciousness: she has been witness to a racist incident. Why, then, didn't she act, intervene in the context with the hope of changing future contexts?

We have in this event a problem that could readily be understood through the moral/political discourse of indifference. Insofar as the woman in the vignette missed an opportunity to speak out against a form of everyday racism, she might appear to have been passive in the face of the suffering that could well ensue from this act of incivility (Essed, 1991). This is a very ordinary event and, as Noble (2005) has argued, it is these small acts of incivility that make the difference between feeling that one belongs to, or is excluded from, the social body. Much less dramatic than the forms of bystander racism that we would associate with an historical event such as the Holocaust, these everyday incivilities present their own moral and political problems (Nelson et al., 2010). Through what kind of pragmatic interventions might we enable bystanders to speak out and act against racism, so as to ameliorate the negative effects of everyday racist encounters? How we might overcome the subjective and social indifference that allows racism to reproduce itself? The problem of the anaestheticisation of the bystander to the suffering of the other represents the classic problem of bystander racism; as the analysis of the famous Kitty Genovese incident suggests, the most common posing of the analytical problem of bystander racism concerns how bystanders could be so numbed to the evils of a situation that they fail to act

(Rosenthal, 2008). Yet, what constitutes an 'event' of everyday racism and, indeed an 'intervention,' might be more difficult to pin down than such analyses admit.

To consider firstly the idea of the event, I would emphasise that, as much literature on the Deleuzian rendering of the event has stressed, an event is always much more than an empirical happening. Or, as Deleuze (1994) would put it, the empirical itself must be seen in its transcendental dimension, as having a virtuality that cannot be fully captured in the sequence of empirical moments that a description of 'what happened' would lay out. While the empirical event is an actualisation of forces that is expressed in the form of 'what happens', it itself is inseparable from a transcendental field of singularities that might be determined in multiple ways. This is not akin to a naïve perspectivalism, which would reduce the multiplicity of the event to a quanta of subjective perspectives. Rather, an appreciation of the virtuality of any event represents a recognition of its excess with respect to the subject of the event per se.

Diagnoses of indifference as a subjective failing clearly presume a subject who pre-exists the event, a subject whose supposedly 'free' action involves a transcendence of the natural order of relations – the encounter of bodies with bodies, ideas with ideas, and the relations of composition and decomposition that characterise the natural world. I have suggested that this represents an impoverished view of human freedom, which is better understood as conditioned by, than opposed to, such relations of force. Where Spinoza provides a rigorous critique of the exceptionalist purview, it is Nietzsche who registers the productive *tension* between nature – as a sheer superfluity of force – and human life, which is 'precisely a wanting to be other than this nature' (Nietzsche, 2003: 16). This 'wanting to be other' is not, to be clear, a rejection or transcendence but involves an active evaluation and affirmation of the complex sense of events.

Within the stereotypical drama of the happening – a human subject faced with a situation and a choice – there is, to put it in Massumi's terms, a much more subtle series of micro-shocks, 'the kind that populate every moment of our lives' (Massumi 2008: 4). We cannot perceive these micro-shocks nor their interruption of 'the onward deployment of life' to the extent that we presume the subject's anteriority to the event. Viewed from the point of view of the human being's transcendence of the forces of the world, any willing that is not sovereign necessarily appears as inaction. I have suggested that while the moral purview posits the human as a being defined by its transcendence, the aesthetic one stresses the immanence of the human to the singular events which constitute it. If the woman in this vignette did not respond in any direct sense to the instance of everyday racism to which she was witness, it may be because that moment in which consciousness recognises 'a racist incident' is only an epiphenomenon of a much more confused event of sense. The minute fluxions of affect that make up the scene may well be experienced by the human being in a confused and overwhelming fashion – as a barely perceived unease, an inchoate distaste, a series of minute shocks – and this is not the failing of indifference but its productivity.

Unfortunately (for morality at least) one never is a 'bystander' to an event, a witness from the outside to something that happens, even if our empirical apprehension posits the subject at a distance. Rather, subjectivity too is constituted through the virtuality of the event, through all the minute differences that make it up. The subject is not in this sense what has an identity but is itself a difference produced through the differentiation of force. Certainly, then, the vignette raises the problem of indifference, but we might understand this less as a deficient *state* (a subjective failing) than as a more ambiguous *process*.

In referring to another, potentially more productive, way of approaching indifference, here I am suggesting that the subject of this event was constituted, quite literally, in-difference. As much poststructuralist thought has emphasised, the challenge for our

tradition, which has always subjugated difference to identity, is to grasp the subject as an effect of processes that exceed it. While morality necessarily posits a transcendent subject, capable of exercising free will in the pursuit of the good, the kind of sensate experience that I have associated with the idea of the aesthetic is more sensitive to this immanence of the subject to the event. There are both analytical and practical possibilities in a thought that posits the subject as an effect rather than cause, as the growing purchase of process ontology in the humanities and social sciences in recent years suggests (see, for example, Stengers, 2011). In this particular context, our sense of what constitutes an action or intervention may be expanded to better attend to the complexity of the events that constitute us. In particular, we have a way of moving beyond the opposition of activity to passivity, which, in existing literature on bystander action, involves a narrow and potentially dubious equation of action with an exercise of free will through which we are drawn out of the materiality of the event in conformity with moral ideals.

The mobilisation of bystander anti-racism is characteristically identified with the kind of decisive action represented by the gesture of ‘speaking out’ against the actions of the racist. Yet, the moral clarity expressed in such a prescription may be misplaced, to say the least. Among other things, and as a more rigorous evaluation of force would underline, there is the potential injury that might arise from the shame of being identified as a victim of prejudice. Had the woman in the vignette spoken out against the incivility she perceived, she might well have felt the ‘speaker’s benefit’ of speaking out (Foucault, 1978: 6), but perhaps also increased the injury to the recipient of the incivility, whose own possibilities for subjective becoming collapse in the identity of injured subject.

The sense of the event, then, might best be evaluated in terms of the forces it expresses. While the incivility itself represents a reactive force (to put it in Nietzsche’s terms), it would be premature to assume that speaking out was necessarily a more active expression of force, guaranteed to lead to an increase in powers and capacities. For, one thing, the subject of the incivility is also constituted through the event, a point that remains habitually overlooked in discourse on bystander anti-racism. When our solution to the problem of racism is to educate on the pro-social benefits of speaking out against racism, we imagine not only that the bystander is a subject who pre-exists events but that the so-called victim is as well. Following Foucault, we could say that we are still habitually attached to the repressive hypothesis of power. In this case, the victim of racism – the ‘Chinese woman’ – is assumed to be a pre-existing racialised subject whose oppression is a repression, yet it is in fact the incivility that produces her as a racialised subject. While speaking out against racism may have its benefits, then, it does risk reducing the other to the injured subject that the incivility produces and addressing them only on these terms.

Fortunately, as I have insisted, the relations of force that constitute us are multivalent. Our sometimes confused sense of an empirical happening need not, then, always be regarded as a danger. Rather, it may lead to a more adequate understanding of what it means to make our affections more active, in order to extend the capacities of diverse bodies, which are themselves constituted by a multiplicity of forces. In this case, an attempted civility (the offering of directions) might have been a perfectly appropriate intervention in the face of an incivility that was characteristically vaguely perceived and inchoate.

To be clear, I am distinguishing here between the moral understanding of indifference, defined by inaction and lack, and a much less negative, more productive understanding of indifference, which recognises the plenitude and complexity of events and our relationship as humans to them. The vignette need not tell the melancholic story of a missed opportunity for action. Rather, we might see in it a sense of the process of being in-difference – the admixture and fluxion of affect – that constitutes an event, as well as the subjects of the event.

To acknowledge the positivity of indifference as a process is to affirm our being in a world that is never given to us ready-made. For the dream of a world of pre-existing values is really nothing more than our attempt to create the world in our own image. Moreover, as both Spinoza and Nietzsche in their own ways remind us, this is an impoverished image of both nature and life, which leads to a confused and diminished sense of our power and our capacity to create new values.

In forming our problematisations, we would do well to acknowledge that no decision is ever made by a subject who pre-exists the event, since we too are constituted by the causes and effects of which the event is made up – the encounters of bodies and ideas, the multitude of singularities, the minute affective fluxions and transformations that make up the scene. If projects of moral education so consistently fall short of the mark, at least as sole interventions, we might want to question the clarity with which we diagnose the problem. More than this, we might want to find a way to disrupt the whole moral economy – the guilt, remorse and other sad passions – with which we imagine a human subject capable of rising above the melee or, failing this, passive in the face of the demands of the situation. With this challenge comes new and potentially fertile modes of evaluation, which aim to affirm rather than deny the multi-valence and singularity of events, which are always more than ours. It is a question of being open to a new pragmatics, which might find new ways of re-intensifying events and ‘re-tinging’ them with potential (Massumi 2002: 21).

Conclusion

In challenging the moral perspective that sees the problem of indifference as a subjective failing, this paper is certainly not meant as an announcement of the redundancy of the question of what it would mean to be responsive to the suffering of the other. What I am suggesting is that a more responsive thought would reappraise the terms in which this problem is posed. It may be necessary, for example, to go beyond the logic of empathising with the other, which belongs more to a moral economy of recognition and identification than an aesthetic economy of singularisation. While recognition and identification may have their part to play, they may also fall painfully short in those instances in which we do not recognise the odium of another’s situation, which surely has no universality but is precisely about singularity.

To the extent that we do recognise the other as the victim of an injustice, we also risk reducing the event to a mere member of a class; namely, the class of unjust events. As Shaviro (2002: 13) suggests, such categorical and generic appropriations of events are mere ‘foci of stabilization’, which do not in themselves allow us to apprehend the singularities that constitute events: ‘remarkable points, points of transformation and singularity.’ As I have argued, an event is never merely an empirical happening but has an excess or virtuality. There is always an unactualised potential that coheres to any happening, an indeterminacy that we might figure as a productive possibility, rather than as a confusedness to be overcome in the clarity of moral action. The constitutive indeterminacy in the *sense* of any event is echoed at the level of *value*, and of course the judgment that a situation or action is good or bad is always retrospective. Perhaps rather than seeking to evacuate this constitutive openness of sense and value, we would do well to approach it on its own terms. To insist that we are ‘a part of the whole’ is not to say that humans are without freedom to do otherwise but is, I have suggested, to better understand the conditions of our freedom.

Yet does admitting, even affirming, the openness of events risk falling into just the kind of relativism that the moral discourse of indifference fears? Does affirming that we are part of a

radically indifferent nature lead us to a generalised un-decidability at the level of sense and a relativisation at the level of value? Such a position would surely be very much at home in late capitalist society, which, as many commentators have indicated is premised precisely on a generalised logic of un-decidability and on the relativisation of value (Baudrillard, 1993).⁵ Yet, **an anxiety about relativisation should not lead us to retreat into the false security of the absolute.** It is, as we have seen, this absolutisation of value that affords the spectre of indifference its monstrous heaviness (how could one be indifferent to that which is clearly wrong?). But value relativism is not the only other option. In fact, it is not an option at all but simply the negative of the logic of the absolute. It belongs to the same logic or, as Nancy (1998) puts it, the same 'sense of the world'. Thus, it is not a question of arguing for the relative value of values but of **enquiring as to their origins and the arrangements of force that a given value expresses.** The kind of sensate encounter with force that I have associated with the aesthetic offers a way into the complex arrangements of force that constitute events. More than this, it reminds us that **the sense and value of events is always multiple, involving points of bifurcation where the potentials for doing and being otherwise remain open.**

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Notes

1. It is not that the denaturalising impulse is thoroughly at odds with a project of renaturalisation. As Spinoza's reinterpretation of the scriptures indicates, **'being natural means being situated within a particular time, place, and causal nexus'** (Sharp 2011: 8) Nonetheless, **renaturalisation is an 'extra-social perspective' that aims to redefine human agency as part of, rather than a transcendence of, nature.**
2. To read such a statement as a thinly veiled acceptance of nihilism is to grossly misunderstand Nietzsche, since his diagnosis of the historical condition of nihilism is always carried out in the name of a refusal to accept the triumph of reactive force (Came, 2009).
3. We can recall Benjamin's warnings against the aestheticisation of politics under fascism and his concern about the removal into an autonomous aesthetic realm of political problems, which could no longer be approached by extra-aesthetic criteria (Benjamin, 1968).
4. Camus' Meursault is often cited as the exemplar of indifference, equally numbed as he is to the death of his own mother and to that of the man whom he murders (Camus, 1988). On the anti-aestheticising capacity of the aesthetic, see Sharpe (2013).
5. While Baudrillard (2008) himself writes on the idea of indifference as a counter-strategy to the fatality of the world, his interest is in cultivating a positive detachment from received images of reality. Yet Baudrillard's reality (and subsequently his strategy of indifference) is one that is defined by a lack of difference, rather than the plenitude of difference I have outlined here. Žižek (2008) also writes on the idea of indifference as a political strategy, but his notion of indifference as doing

nothing does not challenge the attribution of activity and passivity that our moral traditions have reproduced.

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